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ABSTRACT

School board members have long recognized the importance of involving parents and the community in the public schools. Yet, there has never been a greater gap between school and community, partly because almost 70 percent of adults do not have any school-age children, and partly because the public seems to want a far more active relationship with educators than it now has in determining the direction of the local schools. This guide is designed to help school board members through the community-engagement process. It includes help in understanding the rationale, benefits, and concerns that are part of the process of convening the community. Although the specifics of community engagement will be unique for every community, experience shows that success is based on some common principles, a good plan, and continuous work. These principles are described in this guide, along with proved engagement methods and steps to take to be successful. Through well-designed public-engagement efforts, school boards can lead their communities to work actively with the schools to raise student achievement. The guide concludes with a list of organizational resources and publications. (Contains 13 references.) (RT)

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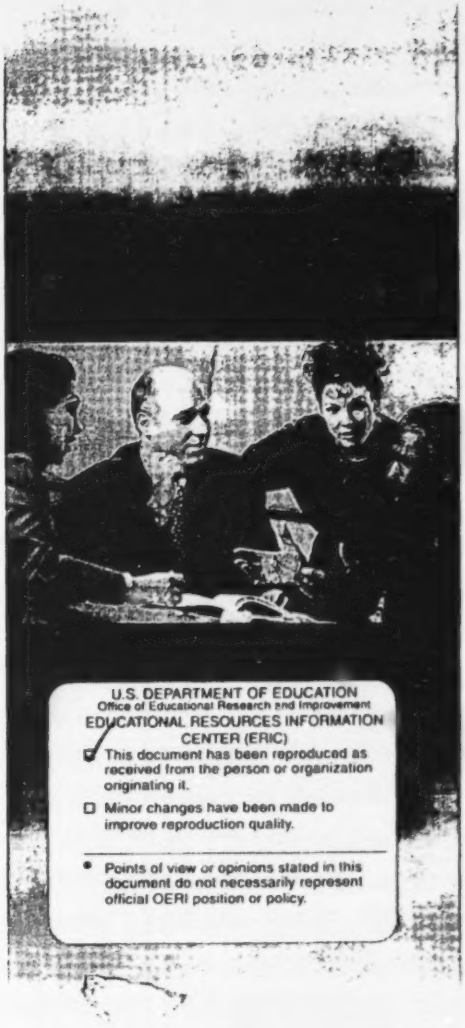

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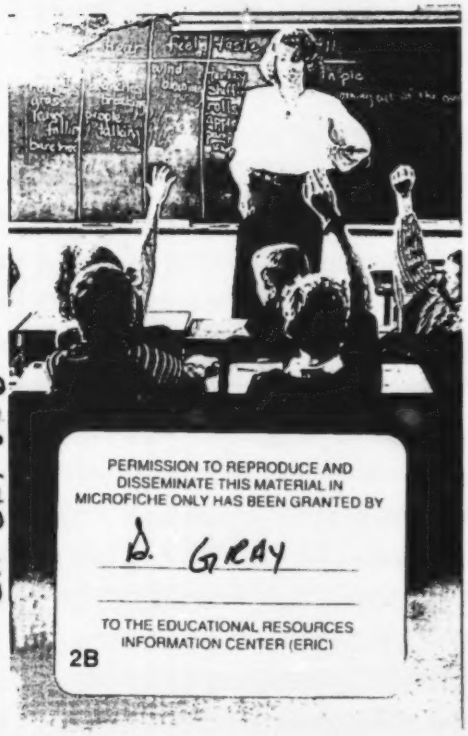

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National School Boards Association

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LEADERSHIP FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

A School Board Guide to Public Engagement

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# COMMUNITIES COUNT:

## A School Board Guide to Public Engagement

*By Michael A. Resnick*

**About the Author**: Michael A. Resnick, NSBA associate executive director, is responsible for the association's advocacy activities—including public policy issues involving the advancement of student achievement and the governance role of the local school board. He is an attorney and has served on the Loudoun County, Virginia, School Board.

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# FOREWORD

School board members have long recognized the importance of involving parents and the community in the public schools. Today, community involvement is more important than ever as the public—parents, business leaders, policymakers, and legislators—has raised its expectations for improved student achievement and a voice in school decision making.

Yet, in his book *Is There a Public for Public Schools*, David Mathews suggests that there has never been a greater gap between school and community. One reason for the gap is that almost 70 percent of adults do not have any school-age children. Another is that the public seems to want a far more active relationship with educators than it now has in determining the direction of the local schools.

In an effort to meet these challenges, school board members must engage the community in a continuous dialogue to sustain the public's commitment to our schools.

Evidence is mounting that an engaged community leads to better schools, improved educational results for children, and higher customer satisfaction among members of the public. Community engagement provides meaningful ongoing conversations with all groups in the community on how to better serve students. From these conversations, public engagement also can involve the public in new ways and at new levels of participation in the schools.

School boards are the natural groups to lead this crucial endeavor. Frequently, however, only limited information is available to school boards to help them chart the best course of action.

In *Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Community Engagement*, author Michael A. Resnick, National School Boards Association associate executive director, guides school board members through the community engagement process. This guide includes help in understanding the rationale, the benefits, and the concerns that are part of the process of convening the community.

Although the specifics of community engagement will be unique for every community, experience shows that success is based on some common principles, a good plan, and continuous work. These common principles are described in *Communities Count*, along with proven engagement methods and what steps to take to be successful.

*Communities Count* is part of a national campaign, the Key Work of School Boards, which was initiated by the National School Boards Association and its state federation members to assist local school boards in their efforts to increase student achievement.

Convening the community is an integral part of that key work. Through well-designed public engagement efforts, school boards can lead their communities to work actively with the schools to raise student achievement. We hope that the ideas presented in *Communities Count* will energize school board members and give them the know-how to succeed in engaging their communities for student achievement. And we hope the result will be to meet the challenge posed by David Mathews: that in community after community, people will come to talk about "our" public schools, rather than "the" public schools.

Anne L. Bryant
Executive Director

# OVERVIEW

At some point most school board members will ask themselves: "What is the greatest contribution I can make during the time I will be serving in this governance position?" In today's high-standards environment, providing leadership to raise student achievement will probably rank at the top of their lists.

But how does a school board provide that leadership? How does it involve the public in a way that bolsters high achievement? This publication, *Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Public Engagement,* together with its companion volume, *The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement,* looks at the way the emerging practice of public engagement can help school boards meet these all-important goals.

To that end, Chapter 1 of this volume, which focuses on the philosophical underpinnings of public engagement, presents public engagement as a new way of thinking about the relationship between school systems and the public. The chapter discusses the potential value of that relationship, including the positive effect public engagement can have on raising student achievement and building public support for the schools.

Chapter 2 examines the school board's leadership role in public engagement. It explores critical points in developing, implementing, evaluating, and advocating a student achievement plan and describes how school board leadership can make a difference. This chapter also identifies leadership strategies to help school board members think about how they can approach the public engagement process both as individuals and as elected bodies.

Chapter 3 provides how-to information about the process. It explores the use of devices such as focus groups and polling and discusses who should be engaged and why.

Chapter 4 builds on Chapter 3 by showing how several state school boards associations and nationally recognized experts in the field have used the public engagement process to advance student achievement.

Finally, the volume identifies other publications and Internet resources that can be consulted. These resources contain a wealth of information regarding concepts in public engagement as well as case studies and contacts that will help school districts successfully convene their communities.

# CHAPTER ONE

## A New Way of Doing Business

Partnerships, community support, public participation: For years such activities have been important parts of many school districts' reform efforts. Today, though, a growing number of school systems are recognizing the need for broader outreach and more comprehensive community involvement, especially if they are to build support for the public schools and make significant gains in student achievement. Rather than being on the periphery, this new breed of public involvement—called public engagement—has moved center stage.

In embracing public engagement around student achievement, school boards have an opportunity to build a partnership with the public that will significantly contribute to the vitality and success of their school system. Beyond having a constructive impact on learning within the schools, community engagement around student achievement also may be the most important leadership step a local school board can take to elevate the public's commitment to children and their education. As a secondary benefit, when done properly, a school board's public engagement initiatives can provide greater value, definition, and visibility to the function of the school board in the public's eye.

For all these important reasons, the successful engagement of the public will require well-thought-out strategies and expectations for each phase of the process. However, convening the public should not be viewed simply as one of the school system's projects, but as a way of doing business. Therefore, before we address how-to strategies, school board members should consider the broader implications of public engagement. For example, public engagement may require the school board to think differently about the roles of the school district and the community as well as its own governance role, including how each relates to the other and how each can help the other.

This chapter explores some of the broader principles and social conditions that school boards should consider in developing their approach to public engagement. Specifically, it discusses (1) the nature of public engagement; (2) the broader value of public engagement in the schools; and (3) various considerations in establishing a more publicly connected school district environment.

### *What Is Public Engagement?*

Public engagement is a two-way communication between a school district and the community it serves. Although the most visible form of that communication may occur in meetings, public engagement is not about a single meeting or even a series of meetings. Nor is it about public relations, defending or seeking ratification for existing programs, or other strategies primarily aimed at shaping public opinion. Instead, public engagement is an ongoing, collaborative process during which the school district works with the public to build understanding, guidance, and active support for the education of the children in its community.

Public engagement also recognizes that society has changed in the way it does business and that school districts, as well as other governmental agencies, must change with it. For example, as consumers, people want more control, choice, and personal service in the marketplace. It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, that the public wants the same things from public schools. As consumers, the public also wants high academic quality and an accountable means by which to evaluate the product. Especially among parents and the business community, these factors translate into an active public voice in the goals, standards, and program choices that define the services that school systems provide. The need for that voice is usually strongest when the public believes the current product is not producing the academic results it wants.

But when school board members decide whether and how to engage the public, theirs should be more than a defensive reaction to public demand for more involvement, improvement, or choices. Rather, school boards should view convening the public as a strategic and

proactive opportunity to strengthen their school systems.

Part of that strategic opportunity may be to develop a better understanding of the public's needs, concerns, and expectations. The strategy also may be to determine how parents, business people, and other members of the public can actively support children, their education, and the school system.

Perhaps the most important goal of public engagement should be the development of a community-based strategic plan for raising student achievement. If a school board believes that the achievement of high academic standards by all students cannot be accomplished by the school district's acting alone, it needs to ask whether it is operating as though it were doing so.

For some school districts, establishing a truly meaningful role for the public may stand in stark contrast to a long-held view within the school system and the community, that, in a professionally run public agency, school officials alone should determine the vision, goals, and services needed to educate children. Therefore, public engagement may have to involve preliminary steps to overcome both resistance within the system and inertia or distrust in the community. It may also mean simply doing a lot of listening and searching for common meaning before launching into a strategic student achievement plan. To do that, school officials may need to reach beyond traditional segments of the community to involve people and leaders whose views have not previously been heard.

As board members consider public engagement in education, they should not assume that they are taking on a unique function or governance role. Both the corporate sector and other governmental entities are turning to the public as well for guidance and support. Key observers in the broader field have concluded that government agencies in general do not operate at their best when separated from community volunteerism. For example, economist and social commentator Lester Thurow describes the path to effective education as a triad of roles: (1) government to set up the institution; (2) businesses to provide the relevance; and (3) volunteerism to provide the power of the community to reach individual children in dynamic ways not available to the school system.

Public engagement in education can take many forms, ranging from convening the community to identify and solve a specific social problem (such as the rise of drug use among teenagers) to addressing broader education issues (such as defining the mission of the school system). Some advocates of public engagement will encourage school officials to treat the process as an end in itself,

## *How Connected Is Your Community?*

Is your community a partner in learning? Has your school system involved members of the public in meaningful activities and goal setting, or has it relegated them to the sidelines? The following questions can help you gauge the strength of your connection to your community:

- Are your school district's goals, standards, and levels of student performance in sync with the community's values, needs, and expectations? How do you know?
- Does your school board have a mechanism for discussing student achievement with various segments of the community or the community as a whole? How effective is that mechanism?
- Does the quality of the education and skills learned in your schools contribute to the economic vitality of your community? Does your school system attract the kind of business growth the community desires? With whom has the school board talked to determine that?
- What are the major public agencies and civic organizations in your community that address the needs of children? Do these groups work with the school system? Do they incorporate or reinforce your school district's student achievement goals in the services they provide? If so, how well do they do so?
- What do parents, the business sector, elected leaders, the media, and others know about your school district's mission, goals, standards, student performance levels, and accountability system?
- Does your school system operate as though it were acting alone?
- Has your district convened a broad cross section of the public before? If so, what was the process and what were the results?
- Is your community generally involved in civic or school activities?
- How would the size, diversity, and possible conflict among constituents affect your public engagement process?

reasoning that, if done properly, public engagement can be a powerful force to rally the community around children and their education. Further, some advocates say, by being involved in the process, the public will more greatly value the school system for the services it provides and the civic cohesiveness and personal interconnectivity that flow from the process.

As school board members consider convening their communities and the role they wish to play, they should keep these benefits of public engagement in sight. But they also should convene the community for the purpose of, and in a manner that will do the most good toward raising student achievement—which is, in the final analysis, the key work of school board service.

## *Why Public Engagement Is Necessary*

Two countervailing trends make public engagement necessary today: the increasing isolation of the schools and the increasing demand to raise student achievement in a more complex world.

**Trend 1: Isolation of the Schools**. Since the 1970s, several forces have come together to isolate many schools and school districts from their larger communities. For example, parents in today's two-career and single-parent households often have less time to be involved in their children's day-to-day education, and parents whose own education is lacking or who aren't fluent in English sometimes report that schools are intimidating or alienating. Even parents who are involved in their children's schools are frequently engaged in volunteer work that has little to do with improving student achievement. Additionally, as school districts have formalized rules and hired more specialists to improve the services they offer, parents often find themselves dealing with frustrating school bureaucracies.

At the same time, many districts have operated in substantial isolation from the business community, civic organizations, and other public agencies. Historically, for example, school officials have sometimes worried that local businesses are primarily interested in using the schools as a source of entry-level job training, and many businesses have distanced themselves from schools because their workplaces require skills that school districts might not be willing to provide. Until recently, school systems and other public agencies have largely avoided collaboration, often out of fear that the failure of one would tarnish the reputation of the other. In an era of high-stakes politics and costs in education, school board members and elected officials representing city and county governments frequently have been reluctant to talk to one another across jurisdictional boundaries.

Finally, schools have become isolated from their communities simply because a smaller percentage of people have children in the public schools. Based on data appearing in the 1998 edition of the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 25 percent of households have children in the public schools, compared to 55 percent in 1960. In many communities, today's percentage may even be lower. That means that three-quarters of the public bases its opinion of public schools on information provided in the media and in personal accounts told over the back fence, typically when something has gone wrong.

**Trend 2: Increased demand to raise student achievement in a complex world.** To complicate matters, as schools have grown more isolated, the demands they face have increased exponentially. In the last decade, our nation has entered the fast-changing, information-driven, and globally competitive world of the 21st century. To prepare the next generation for success, public schools are under intense pressure to raise their academic standards and show positive results under ever-accelerating timetables.

This pressure for academic improvement is usually expressed in terms of international competitiveness or results on national test scores. But a more subtle and economically real competition occurs every time a business makes a decision about where to locate. Most often, a key factor in that decision is whether the local school system can educate students to meet the standards the company needs. Increasingly, that will be the case as technology and information industries are becoming significant factors in local economies. It is also the case for other companies as well, as high skill innovations redefine the way they compete and the geographical nature of their competitive market place.

A recent book by Douglas Henton et al., *Grassroots Leaders for a New Economy: How Civic Entrepreneurs Are Building Prosperous Communities*, makes precisely this point. In the face of greater regional, national, and international business competition, the authors argue, localities must also compete to attract and retain companies by offering them the best "habitat" of community services and quality of life for businesses to succeed in the broader marketplace. That habitat frequently includes a school system that can meet industry's increasing demands for well-educated workers as well as attract educated workers from outside who want a high-quality school system for their children.

Yet, despite this link, all too often local leaders embark on economic development strategies without active participation by school district leaders. The result may be a failure to capitalize on the value that a high-quality education can bring, or worse yet, to develop counterproductive education strategies, such as property tax abatements, or misguided "directives" to the school system. The point is, apart from energizing the public within the school system, many school districts have been separated from forums that involve the larger community context, such as those dealing with economic development and civic planning, where public engagement about student achievement can and should occur.

It is against this backdrop of a largely disconnected public on the one hand and community demand for increased academic achievement on the other that school boards need to consider public engagement.

**Reconciling the trends.** Another key concept deserves mention here. While many school districts are "going it alone," the contemporary direction of public services generally should draw upon the dispersed knowledge of the community. British sociologist Geoff Mulgan, in his book *Connexity: How to Live in a Connected World*, states that within local communities, the explosion of information and high-tech capabilities is expanding our citizenry's diversity of knowledge, along with raising their academic performance skills, in ways that are relevant to the education of our youth. By strategically tapping the "dispersed knowledge" of the community, school officials can enrich programs and motivate students with a cutting-edge, real-world context that in today's diverse environment educators can't possibly keep up with or harness on their own.

Furthermore, many organizations and agencies work with children in ways that schools do not. They, too, are in fields in which information is becoming more specific and can provide insight and know-how about meeting children's needs that school officials may not have on their own.

In addition to providing a mechanism to transmit valuable information and advice from the community, public engagement also offers school systems various ways to tap into a vast web of formal and informal community networks that can provide actual services and opportunities that improve individual student learning. Through public engagement the school program can reach deep into communities through:

- Action by people around the table to work personally with children in ways that support their education.
- Action by people around the table to energize the civic, professional, and other volunteer community groups to which they belong.
- Action by people around the table to inspire one-on-one effort by parents and others throughout the community to actively support their own child's education and that of others through the power of informal networks (such as social groups or neighbors talking to neighbors), as well as through the attention that the media gives to the public engagement process.

## *How Public Engagement Can Help*

Broadly speaking, public engagement can help a school board with four main goals: raising student achievement, supporting the whole child, strengthening the role of the schools within the community, and strengthening representative and participatory democracy.

**Raising student achievement.** By involving parents, members of the business sector, and others in identifying academic goals, standards, resources, and measures of progress, public engagement can be a powerful engine for raising student achievement. And given the demands of the Information Age, such engagement can also bring valuable outside thinking, expertise, and relevance into a school district's thinking. Motivationally, an engaged public sends the message that what students learn and how well they learn it isn't an issue just for teachers and administrators but is a real priority for the community as well.

Further, public engagement provides outside assistance to constructively challenge a system that might otherwise pay too much attention to internal considerations and its own comfort levels rather than pushing as hard as it can to raise student achievement. Likewise, without a public dialogue, a school system may not be aware of changes in students and in the community that can influence the direction, success, or perception of the school district's academic program.

Beyond its impact within the system itself, public engagement can also raise student achievement because of its ability to energize a community. Simply stated, the process of engaging the public in the serious business of schools can lead a community to value education and to commit the time, resources, and voter support needed for improvement.

**Strengthening the whole child.** If raising academic performance is the ultimate goal of the school district,

the community as a whole may need to pay greater attention to the social and health conditions that can interfere with learning. Teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, gang involvement, poor attendance, inadequate nutrition, and lack of health care all have negative effects on how well students learn.

School districts, of course, are aware of such obstacles, but they frequently lack the resources needed to refocus their academic mission so that they can provide the necessary services. Often, too, other public agencies, civic organizations, and parents are in a better position to provide such services. How well these services are performed, and whether they are performed with the educational achievement of students in mind, may depend on how well community agencies and families coordinate with each other and the schools.

While communities may know that certain problems exist, they may not know the magnitude of the problems, and they may not be able to make the connection between having these services available and boosting student achievement. That's where public engagement comes in. Public engagement helps build public understanding and commitment in a way that serves the needs of the whole child. Through a communitywide discussion about the obstacles that students face, a school system can broaden its own understanding of the strategies needed to overcome such problems.

Finally, when a school district or other community group begins to discuss a pressing issue such as drugs or teen pregnancies, that discussion often becomes a springboard for a larger conversation about other issues affecting a community's children. Those other issues often include student achievement and the roles of the schools, parents, and the public in general.

**Strengthening communities and schools.** All too often, even in rural areas and small towns, the realities of daily life have led many people to take a less active part in their communities. Sometimes, in fact, community members don't participate at all—perhaps because of time pressures and competing interests, perhaps because no one has ever asked them to take part.

By convening the community around education, the school board can fill a civic void and create additional value for the school system and the role of the board. Beyond contributing to the education program, the process of public engagement can lead people to think about other ways to improve community life. Moreover, by bringing citizens together, public engagement allows a school system to provide a valuable experience for participants. As a result of the process, citizens are likely to believe that their opinions and involvement count. They're more likely, too, to be connected with other individuals and civic organizations that can benefit their lives.

The point is this: Public engagement not only improves the quality of education but also carries personal and civic benefits that can broadly improve the quality of life in the community, and, as a result, raise the value of the school system. Such engagement sends the message: In this community, education counts, and so does civic spirit to support it.

**Strengthening representative and participatory government.** Public education has been essential to our country's success. It has helped to provide a thriving economy, a free society, and opportunity for all. Indeed, Americans support public education—and remain free—because school systems and government in general operate through representative and democratic self-governance.

In recent years, though, Americans have expressed skepticism and even hostility toward government institutions. In the case of education, citizens support the common interest that public education serves, but too often feel distanced from or indifferent toward the institutions that provide that education. Increasingly, too, citizens are willing to consider options such as vouchers that would provide public funds to privately operated and governed institutions—even if such a move limits the public's democratic participation in education.

## *Key Elements of Public Engagement*

- Two-way communication aimed at listening to community perspectives
- Goal of mutual understanding, developing common meaning and vision
- Use of the "dispersed knowledge" of community for guidance
- Use of community volunteerism: parents, civic organizations
- Aimed at educational results, not just a "feel good" process
- Not about public relations, defending the system, or public ratification of predetermined plans.

In short, today's school boards have to ask themselves: Do voters really believe that school districts are worth preserving as exercises in self-governance? Do they see school systems as institutions that serve all children and the larger interests of society in ways that market-driven private schools cannot? Do voters see and feel enough democracy to support the principle of public education when they go to the polls? Do communities provide enough opportunities for citizen participation so that people have a sense of ownership in the school system or in government in general?

Public engagement can strengthen public support for school districts not only because of what public involvement contributes to education, but because it involves the public in making big decisions. In essence, not only does public engagement offer an opportunity to benefit the school system as an educational institution, but it can also benefit the role of democracy in American government.

## *Barriers to Public Engagement*

To be sure, public engagement has its risks. In fact, a failed public engagement program can produce a negative up-close view of the school system that might cause more harm than not launching the effort in the first place. But fear of failure is no reason to avoid taking action. Instead, school officials should consider the potential barriers to success and the best ways to address them. Among the barriers to consider are the following:

- *Public apathy or alienation from the schools.* Are there segments of the public that should be represented at the table, but whose members, for whatever reason, are likely to feel indifferent or even hostile toward the process? What special efforts can be undertaken to get them involved or to build their trust in and their understanding of the school system?

- *Limits on participant time.* Competition for time has been identified as a key factor in isolating the schools from the community. Has the district's public engagement process been set up in a way that the time, duration, location, and frequency of meetings are convenient for parents, business leaders, and other members of the public? Is the process flexible enough so that leaders from the public can be replaced with minimum difficulty if they need to reduce their commitments?

- *Resistance within the school community.* The public engagement process and the change of direction that might result could conflict with the current culture of the school system or the beliefs of individual school personnel. Have school personnel been adequately prepared for the various steps of the process? Is it likely that they will feel a part of the process and project a supportive attitude, or will they view the exercise as another case of "here we go again" and tolerate the results only if they ratify "business as usual"? To what extent will all employees understand the results of the process and the new expectations for their own performance? Is there a commitment to holding the entire system accountable for achieving the goals in the plan that emerges?

Finally, there is no single recipe for engaging the public. In designing the effort, a school district should keep in mind the reasons it wants to convene the community, and it should design the process to achieve that result.

# CHAPTER TWO

## The Need for School Board Leadership

Public engagement is a powerful force that can drive school reform. But to harness that power takes school board leadership, the subject of this chapter.

Why are school board leadership and public engagement linked? For one thing, school boards are in a unique position to make the process of public engagement work well. Because most school board members—about 96 percent—are elected officials, they have a mandate to work with their communities. As public leaders, they also have the contacts and credibility to bring all constituencies together, including parents, business leaders, and civic groups.

At the same time, school boards govern the school system. So when a school board convenes the public around student achievement, it sends a message to both the community and the school system itself that the effort is "real," that the public's opinions, discussions, and recommendations will have the attention of the decision-makers.

As elected officials, school board members are in a special position to draw the public into their decision making in ways that can build a broadly based community mandate and commitment behind their actions. Unfortunately, when it comes to their governance functions, many local school board members ignore, or at least fail to maximize their leadership potential. For example, when school boards limit public involvement to hearings, three-minute statements, or small advisory committees, they are confining their leadership to governing within the system rather than governing on a broadly public or communitywide basis.

As an exercise in representative democracy and efficient decision making, such a limited public role is defensible for routine school board business. But in dealing with a crucial issue such as student achievement, more dynamic public involvement can produce better educational results. Such involvement also can expand the overall effectiveness of the school board in several ways:

1. A board that is committed to public engagement becomes more visible in the community, and, as a result, the public better understands the board's role and value.

2. Getting diverse advice from the community as a whole enhances the quality and credibility of the board's decisions.

3. The energy and accountability that go along with a public process help a school board focus on the most important issues in the most comprehensive and strategic ways possible.

4. A board that engages its community will find that its decisions generate greater community support because that board is governing on a public scale rather than just overseeing the system.

In short, when the school board engages the community, it creates a natural link between the board's public leadership role and its governance functions—a link that can improve the quality of education and the effectiveness of the board itself.

### *Beginning with Key Questions*

As board members think about convening the community, strategic planning with the superintendent is essential. Specifically, board members may wish to begin with a discussion about current public engagement activities, the process they'll use to involve the community, and the political implications of public engagement. They may also want to discuss the results they would like community engagement to produce, such as energizing the community and the school system, creating a relevant vision, sharpening public accountability, and building support for a plan.

At this stage, the following series of questions can provide some direction:

**Assessing current public engagement activities**

- Does our school system have a way to determine whether the public understands its mission and performance? If so, how is that information determined?
- Does our school system have a way to determine the public's perception of and confidence in the schools? If so, how is that information determined?
- Is the public currently involved in the development of our school district's student achievement plan? If so, how is the public involved? Does the public participate in the process? Does it react to proposals? Is it invited to hear decisions? How broad is public involvement?
- What are the pluses and minuses of our current approach? Are there gaps in the scope of issues we discuss with the public or how we discuss those issues?

**Thinking strategically about engaging the public**

- If our school board convenes the community, what benefits and outcomes do we foresee?
- Looking specifically at our school system's effort to raise student achievement, do we see areas of vision, goal setting, implementation, accountability, or advocacy where public advice, approval, or assistance would be beneficial?
- In what areas do we want the public's role to be advisory, and in what areas do we want the public to share in decision making? For example, do we want educational strategies to be determined by the professional staff and budgetary decisions by the board, not by the public?
- Whom do we want to engage and why? What will their involvement look like?
- Are there specific groups or individuals whose leadership in or knowledge about the community would be beneficial in developing a plan or promoting that plan to others?
- Are there specific groups or individuals whose involvement could strengthen the academic program or services provided to students? (An example of the former might be curriculum reform; an example of the latter, drug prevention programs.)
- What will the agendas and flow of our meetings look like?
- In general should the school system have a way to test new ideas with the public or to receive feedback on specific initiatives?
- What are the financial costs of our public engagement plan?
- What is the time commitment of the school board, superintendent, and staff?
- What risks or obstacles are involved in convening the community and how can they be resolved?
- Once our school system and the public have developed a student achievement plan, what steps, if any, will be taken to determine the broader public's reaction to it?

**Thinking politically about the process**

- Should a facilitator be retained to design or implement the process? How do we need to train or prepare board members and staff for their roles?
- How, if at all, do we want to involve and prepare the media in the various stages of the process?
- How well do the key stages of the process coincide with the school calendar as well as the budget cycle and the political cycle?
- How and at what point in the process does the school board, individually and collectively, want to be involved?
- Have we identified avenues of school board involvement that add to the process?
- What are the implications of the process on school board governance? What are the costs, the political risks, or the obstacles to success?
- What leadership message does the school board want to project? (For example, is the board collaborative, open, student-oriented, focused on student achievement and quality?)
- How and at what stages in the process does the school board want to evaluate its public engagement activities? (For example, is there sufficient community participation, progress in defining a common vision, and, ultimately, a rise in student achievement?)

**Being results oriented**

- Are we comfortable that our public engagement plans can produce the desired results?

- In light of the entire discussion, do we still want to convene the community?

## *Planning for Success*

This section briefly switches the focus from public engagement *per se* to describing an overall approach local school boards may take in developing a student achievement plan. In *Raising the Bar: A School Primer on Raising Achievement*, authors Gerald Bracey and Michael Resnick recommend that the district's student achievement plan be based on four pillars:

1. Creating a vision.

2. Creating an environment to achieve the vision.

3. Implementing a results-oriented accountability system tied to the plan.

4. Building public support for the plan.

The following paragraphs broadly describe each of the pillars, how public engagement can contribute to their success, and how the role of the local school board fits into the engagement process:

**Vision.** A school system's vision should embody the aspirations, values, and direction from which everything else flows. That vision answers the crucial question: What does an education in our school system mean? In approaching this fundamental step, a school board should ask whose vision it wishes to create: its own vision, the customers' vision, the school professionals' vision, or some combination of these.

Certainly, school staff and school boards can independently fashion a clear vision, lofty goals, and challenging academic objectives. But will the public as a whole know what the school system stands for and what it wants to accomplish? Will the school system accurately reflect community needs? Will the public agree and be motivated to support the schools and student learning?

One way of obtaining community support is to empower the public with a sense of ownership and responsibility for the development of the vision. Given the public and representative nature of vision setting, convening the community around that purpose is clearly a major function of school board leadership.

**Operational Environment.** Once the vision is created, the school board and superintendent should develop an operating plan. This process will include setting standards to reflect the vision and then aligning resources so students have the high-quality instruction and support they need to succeed.

As school boards and the professional staff develop these aspects of the plan, they should consider the advice and support that the community at large can provide. For example, in establishing standards, parents and members of the business community can provide significant insight into the content knowledge students must have and the performance levels they must meet to satisfy the community's vision of achievement. Likewise, parents and various civic groups can contribute time and resources to galvanize community support around student achievement. In other words, once the community has established its vision, school boards should ask how the community's dispersed knowledge can contribute to defining and producing success.

Beyond tangible ideas and supportive activities, public engagement also can create the positive climate within the school district and the community that is needed for success. If the public doesn't see the connection between the vision and the plan, though, that enthusiasm could be lost. School boards should ask how they can be sure the public understands the relationship between the vision it has participated in creating and the plan, including how specific strategies and changes in the system are connected. The vision-setting process shouldn't appear disconnected in the public's eye from the reality of school operations.

Clearly, if the school district wants to change its policy on key strategies or reallocate budget resources, there is substantial value to the public's knowing that those strategies are tied to the vision it helped create. Further, if the public is involved in the discussion over big strategies such as site-based management, high-stakes testing, or raising academic standards, it is more likely to understand and support changes in direction.

In developing an operational plan, school boards also should consider when and how to involve the public. Should the public, for example, provide initial advice or react to staff proposals? Should it even participate in specific areas of decision making? When engaging the public on specific educational strategies, school boards may wish to be cautious—and most members of the public understand the limits of their contribution. According to the 1999 Public Agenda report, *Playing Their Parts: What Parents and Teachers Really Mean by Parental Involvement*, the public clearly doesn't want to run

schools—and it probably is less interested in running school districts.

Instead, the public is more likely to want to provide advice on global strategies and ways in which it can help. Moreover, at the operational level, school boards must consider when to assert their own governance responsibilities and when to recognize those matters that should be left to the superintendent, such as designing the details of the school system's academic plan.

**Accountability.** When it comes to student achievement, the public cares most about results. And given the state of the debate over education today, the public clearly should have some role in evaluating the school system's progress beyond simply electing school board members. Specifically, consistent with state requirements, the public needs to be involved in discussing how performance will be assessed, including how the system, the students, and the community will be held accountable for meeting expectations. Further, it should be involved in discussing the kind of information that will be reported to parents about students, and to the public about schools and the school district. School board members would probably want to listen to those discussions as the school district develops its criteria and format for public reporting and accountability.

**Advocacy.** The fourth pillar involves public advocacy for the student achievement plan. Even if the school system convenes a broad cross section of the community, only a limited portion of the population will be actively involved in the public engagement process. Therefore, a key role of the school board, as the public's elected representative, is to build acceptance and enthusiasm for the student achievement plan across the community.

Given the substantial influence and the leveraging power of community networks, school boards need to forge collaborative relationships throughout the community if they're to be effective public advocates of the plan. That collaboration, in fact, can be as important as involving the community in developing the content of the plan.

If members of the community believe they own the plan and are willing to advocate publicly for it, media atten-

## *A Balancing Act*

How does a school board balance its commitment to public engagement with its role as a policymaking body rather than a day-to-day manager? It does so by being mindful that different kinds of school board involvement may be required at different points in the process.

For example, school board members will clearly want to be involved in mustering support for public engagement. And depending on the approach they take, they may want to be present during the vision-setting process, or even participate in various phases of the public discussion. But once a student achievement plan is in place, board members may want to decide whether to be present during community discussions about ways to implement specific elements of that plan on the basis of such factors as the detail and time involved.

Community members who participate in this stage of the process need to know, though, that they have been convened as part of a larger mission that was done as an initiative of the school board.

Accountability is a different question. The school board clearly holds the superintendent accountable for implementing the district's educational improvement plan, and it needs to provide the superintendent with the flexibility and the support necessary to achieve success.

Ultimately, though, the public holds the school board accountable for meeting the community's expectations. Therefore, school boards may want to attend accountability sessions so they can hear the public's views on how it judges success and failure, as well as the public's opinion and advice on the school system's accountability measures.

Advocacy also calls for direct school board involvement on key aspects of the public engagement effort, so the board will be able to speak with conviction about and provide examples of:

- The importance of the process
- The work that was accomplished
- Their own leadership and involvement
- The community's general and diverse perspective on the key points.

By being involved in the process, school board members will also be in a stronger position to ask community participants personally to join the district's advocacy efforts and help build support for the plan.

tion and public acceptance are likely to follow. Hence, the board's advocacy role is twofold: (1) to build understanding and support for the plan directly with the public; and (2) to build an influential core of citizens who can advocate the plan to the general public, including their own networks of community contacts.

**The Student Achievement Plan: Final Points.** In sum, what might the product of this four-phase student achievement plan, with public engagement, look like? To give a specific example, it might mean that the public has participated in, and has made a commitment to, a vision of a world-class education. Next, the public might agree that the goal of the system would include making certain that 90 percent of the district's graduates are ready to go to college or to enter the high-tech local economy. To reach that goal, one objective might be that 95 percent of all third-graders would read at grade level in two years. Finally, programs such as after-school tutoring and parent-involvement projects might have to be put in place, and professional development programs on teaching reading might be needed. Advocating the vision, goals, and resources in the media and before various community groups might be necessary so the public knows what to expect and how to help—including supporting the budget. Assessing the effectiveness of such programs and the achievement plan itself is also key.

Overall, a community that has been involved in a public engagement process is more likely to understand what the school district is trying to do and why it is committing or reallocating resources. It will also be more likely to support the plan with its votes and volunteer efforts.

Finally, while attaining success should be cause for celebration, raising student achievement is not a one-cycle endeavor, and performance goals are not static and unchanging. Instead, raising achievement is a quest for continuous improvement through the renewal of the four-phase process. Within this process, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) has identified eight action steps for school boards to raise student achievement including the public engagement activities presented here. (NSBA's eight action steps are outlined in the sidebar on page 13.)

## *The Importance of Leadership*

As noted earlier, the board's role in public engagement initiatives comes from its leadership position in the community. That leadership, though, needs to be exercised effectively. In *Leader of the Future*, management guru Peter Drucker observes that effective leadership does four things: It develops followers, focuses on results, remains visible, and exercises responsibility.

### *Finding Leaders for the Long Haul*

Providing sustained and credible leadership, especially around an issue like raising student achievement, will probably be a long and complex process extending over several years. More importantly, during different phases of the process, different kinds of leadership may be needed. At one point in the process, for example, the process may require leaders who can help recruit a cross section of participants; at another, it might require leaders who can help build a consensus or provide knowledge about the special needs of children.

That means that the board and the superintendent need to be able identify the persons best suited for specific roles—and they need to be able to look within the school system and in the public at large to find such representatives. Within the board itself, members are encouraged to recognize their respective talents and time commitments in determining which members would be most effective in leading or representing the board in specific phases of the public engagement process. School board members also must be able to harness the power of existing community leaders who can bring value to the table and take information and action steps back to their own constituents.

Leadership also involves designing the public engagement process in a way that empowers leaders and other participants to perform their functions in the process, and reinforces that public engagement is a team effort.

Drucker's observations have a direct bearing on the leadership function of local school boards and their role in convening the community as a vehicle for raising student achievement. For example, it is axiomatic that if a school board is going to lead, it must have followers. Here a distinction is drawn between having campaign followers who promote an individual board member to the voters in the election process (a function that ends on election day) and having followers who participate in the school board's governance process. By convening the public, the school board not only leads through its legal power as a policymaker, but it will cast a much broader and effective leadership net by bringing the support and energy of the entire community behind it. That is, it develops followers.

Leadership—especially in education—is also about producing results that count. At the polls, the public princi-

pally cares about the school board's stewardship of the school system. By convening the community around student achievement, the school board can produce a platform based on results that the public truly cares about. When a school board involves only the public in lower level or logistical decisions, such as those about bus routes or attendance boundaries, it invites the public to define board members as caretakers or fixers, not leaders.

When Drucker speaks about visibility, he means leading by example. If a school board wants to be a leader for student achievement and inspire others to take action, then it needs to consider how it is demonstrating it own commitment at public engagement meetings, regular board meetings, and community activities. Taking responsibility for its actions and setting a good example are important.

Finally, Drucker argues that leadership is not about the title or office that an individual occupies, but what someone does with the position. When a school board personally and politically commits itself to the active pursuit of student achievement and uses public engagement to achieve that goal, that board assumes a level of responsibility for the office that rises beyond governing through the status of its position to true leadership. In short, if local school boards want to be community leaders on student achievement, they must, through their own actions, "walk the talk."

This kind of leadership doesn't mean the school board does it all or acts outside of its corporate role. Rather, the board's function is to lead by putting a process in motion, then listening, inspiring, and empowering others to build and support the plan. Applying the advice of management consultant Gifford Pinchot to the school district setting, the school board role isn't to serve as the primary player so much as it is to design the game.

And it is designing the game that counts. The board's leadership role requires it to build and sustain momentum for results, and that momentum can spell the difference between failure and success.

## *Key Work of School Boards*

In addressing the four pillars of student achievement, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) has also launched a program called the Key Work of School Boards. NSBA's web site (*http://www.nsba.org*) elaborates on these pillars in eight action steps for school boards and describes how the public can be involved in a variety of formal and informal ways in each. The eight action keys that define the school board's overall leadership roles are *vision, standards, assessment, accountability, alignment, climate, collaborative relationships,* and *continuous improvement.* These steps are discussed briefly below and again in *The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement*, the companion volume to this publication:

**Vision**

- Create district and community consensus on achievement objectives.
- Clearly define expectations for what students should know and be able to do.
- Quantify those expectations and set agreed-upon measures for achievement.

**Standards**

- Establish clear standards for student performance and communicate them continually.
- Base standards on an external source that has credibility in the community.
- Disseminate standards clearly and widely to students, staff, and community.

**Assessment**

- Ensure that assessments are tied to established standards.
- Use multiple, on-going assessment measures.
- Ensure that assessments are explained to the community.

**Accountability**

- Measure the performance of all school staff members, administrators, and the school board itself against student achievement objectives.
- Continually track progress and report results honestly.

**Alignment**

- Align resources to ensure students meet standards.
- Include the community in the review of the district budget and management process.
- Ensure that resources support parents in helping their children with schoolwork.

**Climate**

- Create a climate that supports the philosophy that all children can learn at high levels
- Empower staff to meet the needs of all students.
- Model mutual respect and professional behavior in board meetings and with the school district superintendent and staff.

**Collaborative relationships**

- Build collaborative relationships with political and business leaders to develop a consensus for student success.
- Communicate regularly with federal and state officials about student achievement.
- Model behavior that emphasizes trust, teamwork, and shared accountability.

**Continuous improvement**

- Commit to continuous education and training on issues related to achievement.
- Use data on student achievement to set priorities for allocating resources.
- Adjust strategic plan on the basis of data and community input.

As school board members develop their plans of action, they should consider how the shape of the public engagement process might contribute to their own actions in each of these eight areas and to the end result. For example, the board should ask, "Are we involving the public in the vision-setting stage in a manner that will improve the quality, credibility, and sustainability of the plan itself?"

# CHAPTER THREE

## Getting Started

As the last chapter suggests, public engagement efforts will fail without effective leadership. Equally important, though, are the everyday logistics of the process. This chapter outlines the main features of public engagement and discusses how each can be used to produce constructive results. Specifically, it describes (1) the use of focus groups, polling, town meetings, e-mail, and study circles; (2) the role of sponsors and facilitators, and (3) whom to involve and why to involve them.

## *How to Engage the Public*

There is no single recipe for engaging the public. In designing the effort, it is important to keep in sight the reasons a school district wants to convene the community and to design the process to achieve that result. If raising student achievement is the goal, school boards should consider whether their process truly invites the dispersed knowledge of the community. Was each step designed to welcome the public's ideas, volunteerism, and advocacy for children, their education, and the student achievement plan?

By contrast, if the process is designed, or is perceived to be designed, to manipulate a possibly predetermined result or endorse the status quo, it probably will fail and generate alienation, distrust, and resistance to future efforts. The point is, it counts how the process looks, feels, and carries the conversation with the public.

However, the goal is not about sharing power or having a good conversation with the public. Although a meeting should be designed to have a well-received conversation, the conversation itself is a step in the process. Improving the school system should be the goal and will, in the long run, be the measure of the school board's leadership and success.

In convening the community, it is unlikely that a diverse group of people from across the school district will be able to come together in one meeting and develop a systemwide vision for student achievement. Neither will one meeting be sufficient time for people to understand operational goals or formulate their own role or support for what the system is seeking to do through the engagement process. Most likely, there will be many meetings over many months. Therefore, the process should be viewed as a long-term commitment and should be planned in that manner.

It also is likely, if not guaranteed, that there will be confusion among the public and varying points of view about what the school system is seeking to do, how well it is doing it, and what the public expects from the school system. These viewpoints may differ among sectors (for example, parents, businesses, and the general public) as well as within sectors (such as culturally and socioeconomically diverse parents and neighborhoods).

## *Processes to Consider*

Public engagement is a long-term commitment, not a short-term fix, and part of that long-term commitment involves listening closely and carefully to members of the community.

Only by listening can a school board understand a community's perspectives, concerns, and aspirations. Five strategies—focus groups, telephone polling, public meetings, e-mail, and study circles—can help school boards listen more effectively.

**Focus Groups.** Focus groups—small groups of people brought together for a specific discussion—can be a useful way for school systems to develop a clearer understanding of the issues they face. These groups offer other advantages as well. First, by starting with small focus groups rather than plunging directly into a large public meeting, school officials are less likely to be surprised by concerns that might derail a larger meeting. Second, such groups allow participants to develop a common language about their schools as well as respect for one another's interests. Further, focus groups can be used as a step toward conducting a larger meeting—that is, as a way to help establish the agenda or anticipate public reaction to key points.

Generally, focus groups involve between 10 and 15 people who meet once for a couple of hours and respond to a planned set of questions. To work best, these groups should include people with different viewpoints as well as people who aren't already known to the school system. (A school system might work with community organizations to help recruit the latter.) The school system should also consider using a series of focus groups to provide for adequate diversity and mixes of individuals.

Given the stakes involved and the complexity of the process, school systems should seriously consider using the services of trained facilitators who can organize the questions to ask, keep the groups on track, resolve conflicts, and help reach a conclusion. Various consulting groups can provide facilitator training. Additionally, local businesses, universities, or experienced members of the school district staff might be willing to contribute their services.

### *Some Questions to Ask in Focus Groups*

- Where do we see the economic and social direction of our community going?
- Where do we want the community to go?
- What impact are the schools having in our community? What impact should they have?
- Does the community believe its children are achieving?
- Do the taxpayers believe that they are getting their money's worth?
- Are enough of our school district's students graduating from high school? Going to college? Entering the work force with the skills and competence local employers need?
- Does the community have concerns about school completion rates, teen pregnancy, or safety in the schools?
- Are school programs flexible enough to accommodate varying student needs?
- Do parents understand the school system's goals and what it expects of their child?
- Do parents feel welcome in the schools?

Though useful, focus groups have their limits. They cannot, for example, be viewed as a representative sample of public opinion. Such a sample would require polling or some other survey technique. Still, focus groups can be a valuable tool in the public engagement process because they can stimulate discussion in a way a large group meeting cannot.

In sum, focus groups can help school officials:

- Understand diverse community perspectives on the schools
- Appreciate the pressures and attitudes at home and in the community that affect student achievement
- Identify issues to discuss at larger public meetings as well as individuals who might participate
- Test ideas for vision setting and other aspects of public involvement.

**Polling.** Polling services are another option. Telephone polling services, for example, are relatively inexpensive and can provide a more representative sample of the community. Although polling won't provide the depth or reveal the underlying thinking the way focus groups can, it can help school districts understand the broader public's thoughts about educational goals, student performance, program priorities, and views on specific issues. To produce accurate public opinion, polling questions must be simple, unbiased, and designed to evoke an unqualified and singular response; polls should also ask a small number of questions.

Another advantage: Polling can be used at any time during the public engagement process. Early in the process, it can gauge support for specific issues or policy options. Later, after the school board adopts a plan, it can be used to test public understanding and continuing support. Polling also can be a way to hold the district accountable by measuring how the public or segments of the public ultimately judge the results attained.

School systems can use polling districtwide, or they can focus on specific groups or specific attendance areas whose interests and opinions might be lost with districtwide polling. Finally, while polling is used primarily to gather information, it also serves as a good public relations device. Regardless of their opinions about an issue, most people will have more positive feelings about a school system simply because someone took the time to ask them what they thought.

In short, polling can:

- Provide feedback from a larger and more representative group of constituents than focus groups can
- Provide targeted feedback from parents, businesses, or the majority of the voting public that has no contact with the schools as well as from specific neighborhoods
- Enable the general public to believe that it was included and that the school district values and respects its opinions
- Provide a mechanism to test public opinion and awareness about the school system, proposed plans, and the results that are achieved
- Inform the public about key issues being addressed in the schools.

**Large Public Meetings.** By bringing together larger numbers of people, a school district can extend a dialogue to include a broad cross section of ideas and a mixture of interests. In addition to providing school officials with a more comprehensive view of community opinion and needs, larger groups also enable both the public and school district participants to understand the countervailing interests, needs, and values the system must accommodate.

Larger meetings that involve listening and efforts at consensus building also can create a sense of participatory democracy, which, in turn, is more likely to yield greater community support. That broad support can come in three ways:

- Through the actual work done by the participants
- Through the message participants communicate to the community at large via formal and informal networks (example: a business leader's report to the local Rotary Club)
- Through media coverage of the event.

Generally, the objective being sought will help determine the size of the meeting, the format, and the selection of participants. For example, if a school system wants to establish stronger links with the business community, one of its strategies might be to organize a meeting to discuss the role schools play in a community's economic growth. If the meeting is intended to attract chief executive officers and major business owners, it probably needs to be small enough to allow for discussion and dialogue and should be limited to perhaps 50 people or less.

## *Take a Seat, Please*

As trivial as meeting logistics may seem, they can be especially important for those parents or other members of the community who come to the table already feeling alienated by the school system or overwhelmed by its authority and expertise. After all, the public should feel it has the right to participate and not just that a courtesy has been extended to it.

School officials should think through exactly what they want to accomplish at each meeting and establish an agenda for that purpose. If the objective is to have an open discussion and to seek the establishment of consensus, the physical setting itself can be critical.

Indeed, how people are seated around the table can influence the flow of the conversation and the subtle cues that are sent. For example, using a head table in front of rows of chairs for public participants gives the appearance of command-and-control whereas arranging the tables in a hollow square provides a sense of equality. Likewise, if representatives of the school system are bunched together, the arrangement of the room suggests an attitude of "us" vs. "them" rather than a true conversational setting.

By contrast, if the purpose of the meeting is to determine the extent of student drug use and develop strategies for addressing that problem, a broad-based town meeting of 1,000 interested citizens is likely to be more successful. In fact, testimony from such a meeting could become the basis for follow-up strategies. Generally, meetings of 100 people or more will involve formal proceedings or hearings that require microphones, time limits, and limited opportunity for spontaneity or interaction.

Despite that drawback, such large public meetings have their advantages: They allow people to have their say, for example, and help school districts build broad-based support for their efforts. To achieve greater in-depth dialogue, larger meetings can be designed to include breakout groups or roundtable discussions. Other physical logistics of the meeting need to be considered as well. Even an issue as seemingly insignificant as how the table is set up can influence the public's perception of your efforts.

Like focus groups, large community meetings might need the services of an outside facilitator. In cases where these

meetings are occurring at a number of sites and the cost of retaining such a facilitator is not feasible, school districts should consider a training program for local moderators.

**E-mail and Other Technologies.** Technology is a powerful tool that can connect school districts with the public in a variety of ways. In terms of convening the community, e-mail networks involving parents, business people, and other audiences can provide a valuable, low-cost mechanism for reaching a large constituency. Such networks are also an excellent method for receiving ideas and reactions, especially from those who cannot attend meetings. E-mail surveys can't be viewed as representative samples of opinion, though. Rather, they reflect only the response of those who use technology, and even then findings might be skewed to reflect the thoughts of those who felt strongly enough about an issue to respond.

Other technologies can also help a school district convene the broader community. For example, in larger school districts, public meetings could be presented on public-access cable television using a call-in feature to involve the public in the discussion. Using technology, a school system can also keep the general public and other key audiences apprized of test scores, teacher qualifications, racial composition, and other issues, both at the school and district level. E-mail, too, can foster conversations between parents and teachers outside of the school day.

The scope of public communication through technologies is fairly extensive. Several organizations, such as the Family Education Network, which works in partnership with NSBA, should be consulted for additional ideas.

**Study Circles.** Study circles provide another effective technique for convening the community around key student achievement issues. A study circle typically will involve a group of eight to twelve people, preferably with diverse points of view. Study circles are distinguished from focus groups in the following ways:

- Study circles usually address specific issues rather than open-ended generalized questions about the school system.
- Participants in study circles may be provided data about enrollments, achievement levels, teacher qualifications, and other issues (but not proposals or conclusions) to help inform their discussion rather than ask participants to speak solely from personal knowledge.
- Study circles generally meet several times (for example, weekly for four weeks) rather than once.
- School personnel may participate in study circles to dispel any misinformation; provide context, but not conclusions; or ensure they have bought into the process while focus groups would not involve school district personnel for these purposes.

Both study circles and focus groups are relatively small in size. And, as with focus groups, several study circles may be conducted simultaneously around the same agenda and then form the basis for a larger meeting to develop an action proposal. Because of the knowledge that participants have built around the issues, the larger meeting may be limited to study circle participants.

Like focus groups, study circles should also use trained facilitators to move the conversation as well as trained recorders to ensure that any subsequent steps accurately reflect the thinking of the community of people who were involved. Also, as with focus groups, school districts should consider launching study circles with the involvement of credible and diverse community sponsoring organizations who can play a planning and recruiting role.

## *The Role of Sponsors and Facilitators*

In launching a public engagement program, a very different message is sent if one or more community groups (the Chamber of Commerce, for example, or the United Way) sponsors the activity than if the school district is going it alone.

The chief benefit of organizing the public engagement process under the aegis of outside groups, or in cosponsorship with the school system, is increased credibility. Especially in the early stages (for example, to get the community's reaction to the schools or to engage in vision setting), meetings sponsored by civic groups emphasize the importance of community and de-emphasizes the notion that the school system is in control.

Additionally, including respected community leaders and people in key organizations on the sponsoring committee will increase the likelihood of their own future participation and draw increased citizen and media involvement. Similarly, leaders of sponsoring organizations can stimulate volunteerism within their own groups at various stages in the engagement process, as well as in subsequent implementation.

Serious consideration should be given to asking community sponsors to serve on a planning committee to help design the public engagement process. When a school

system works with the community in this way, it will stimulate greater ownership, excitement, and belief among community leaders in the process and thereby ensure that the activity is a success. Further, community engagement has a variety of out-of-pocket costs, such as the costs of meeting facilities, experts, and polling, and community groups are more likely to contribute financially or in-kind to a process they have helped design.

The earlier discussion of focus groups, larger meetings, and study groups emphasized the importance of using trained facilitators. Specifically, a trained facilitator can ensure that participants have a clear sense of purpose and focus in their community conversation and can ensure that all views are heard and moderated without bias or the appearance of an agenda by the school system or sponsors. Community meetings should also include recorders, especially for meetings that will be reported to audiences who were not present (for example, school staff, parents, the media) or where minutes are essential for future action. In such cases, recorders should be trained to capture, without personal bias, central points, areas of consensus and disagreement, and questions or concerns.

## *Getting the Community Around the Table*

School officials will also need to decide whom to include in the public engagement process and how to get these people involved. Placing public announcements in community newspapers or on the radio might seem like an open and democratic approach, especially for a town meeting. But that approach probably won't produce a representative cross section of participants. Neither is it likely to yield a group of participants who have a clear sense why they are attending.

A better approach might be to develop a list of the categories of people the school system wants to involve (parents or key business or civic leaders, for example). If the goal is to involve representatives of the community as a whole, civic and organizational leaders from these groups might identify prospects, bring people into the conversation, and generally build public credibility for the public engagement process.

Often, school systems can readily tap into the pool of community leaders who already attend school board meetings or who are otherwise involved in school activities. While it is probably helpful to involve community leaders who regularly attend school board meetings or who are involved in organized school activities, public engagement activities should emphasize the general public. By involving only the "usual crowd," it is less likely that the real perspective and understanding of the community will be reflected. Further, the school system will lose the opportunity to broaden the network of people it could be reaching. At the same time, members of the public who are regularly involved with the system can play an important role. In addition to participating themselves, they can help identify other participants, use their credibility to bring others into the process, and help foster understanding and trust during discussion of specific school issues.

### *Who Should Be Involved and Why*

1. General citizens—parents, business people, voters—should be involved because they:

- Represent the average person's expectations of the school system
- Contribute to broad-based support for the school system, including identifying strategies to reach specific sectors of the community
- Can help identify volunteers to implement the school district's plan.

2. Community leaders—office holders; the media; and civic, business, and philanthropic leaders—should be involved because they:

- Provide public leadership and visibility by involving people who have the public's attention and respect
- Provide leadership by involving people who can make things happen in their own organizations, such as drawing on their own people, services, and other resources.

3. People with special expertise—social service agencies, educators, universities, and preschool and day-care providers should be involved because they:

- Provide information about the condition of children in the community and strategies implemented elsewhere
- Provide a source for coordinating services with the school system.

Further, in determining whom to involve, school boards should consider not only how various groups can help them define and achieve their vision but also what the school system might be able to do for different groups. For example, school systems should ask about ways they might help parents and not simply expect parents to volunteer their time in the classroom.

Snapshots of various constituent groups appear below:

**Parents**. Parents are the most important participants in any public engagement process; after all, their attitude and their ability to support their children's learning are crucial to academic success. Clearly, a school system must know what parents are able to do and what obstacles they face. If it wants to build on parents' active support, a school system must also listen to their concerns and not simply provide them with a list of things to do.

A school system that has embarked on a public engagement plan must also take care to involve a variety of parents. PTA leaders and other parent activists can contribute substantially to any discussion of student achievement. But other parents—perhaps the majority—might have different agendas, opinions, and aspirations for their children, and they, too, should be included. Having a cross section of parents, representing differences in culture, race, socioeconomic status, neighborhoods, and age, is also important. In other words, the school system needs to reach out to parents who are not already involved.

In addition, school systems should listen carefully to determine what parents need from the schools in order to be enthusiastic and effective partners in the education of their children. What kind of information do parents want? What time of day is best for them to meet with school officials? What logistical issues do they encounter when they deal with schools? Focus groups can provide valuable insights.

School leaders also must be sensitive to how parents want to be involved in the broader public engagement process, such as the key areas of vision setting and in implementation. Fortunately, many parents would like to be involved in these broader districtwide activities. However, research and polls suggest that most parents are likely to be most interested in the nuts-and-bolts of their own child's education, within their own schools, and to respond to efforts that:

- Help them ensure that children complete their homework and improve school attendance
- Encourage communication with teachers
- Invite their understanding and ideas about the specifics in the direction and goals of their child's education program
- Enable them to assist in the schools and in community activities that promote education
- Make it possible for them to talk and meet with other parents to discuss the importance of raising student achievement
- Help them encourage their civic and religious groups to reach out to more parents to reinforce their commitment to their children's education and to help build their skills.

**Civic Leaders and Community Organizations.** Many communities have organizations dedicated to helping youth, and these organizations can bring a wealth of information to a public engagement effort. Their understanding of children's needs, their experience operating programs, their access to parents and others in the community, and their advice can all be extremely valuable. Moreover, some of these groups might also be in a position to provide educational services (such as after-school tutoring) or social services (such as health care programs or drug prevention workshops).

Traditional groups include the YMCA and YWCA, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the NAACP, La Raza, and church-affiliated groups. In the past few years, other community groups have appeared as well, including several national networks focused on disadvantaged youth.

For example, retired Gen. Colin Powell is leading a national movement called America's Promise: The Alliance for Youth, whose aim is to organize efforts on a community level to strengthen the character and competence of the nation's youth. Aimed at the least-advantaged children, the program has five objectives:

- To build relationships between children and a mentoring adult
- To provide safe and structured activities during non-school hours
- To provide a healthy start
- To ensure marketable skills through an effective education
- To teach children to give back to the community.

The Public Education Network, which has a presence in more than 250 school districts, is targeted at improving the schools through the involvement of community-based organizations. Like America's Promise, the network harnesses community power by bringing together various community groups, businesses, public agencies, foundations, and schools. It also focuses on the needs of disadvantaged youth.

A third group, Communities in Schools (formerly Cities in Schools), which operates in more than a thousand schools, organizes the community to achieve a mission for youth comparable to America's Promise.

What is important about these groups is that they are organized to serve youth, to reach and influence a broad range of parents and other key constituents, and to involve community leaders from civic and business groups in their leadership. Sometimes these groups operate their own community engagement activities involving student achievement, and sometimes their mission might seem slightly different from the schools' mission. Such community groups should be viewed as opportunities for what they can offer, not as competitors and not as irrelevant.

**Business Leaders.** Business leaders know about the importance of high standards, testing, and accountability. Groups representing big business, such as the National Alliance of Business and the Business Roundtable, have done extensive work in the area of standards and assessment and have encouraged local involvement among their members. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which represents smaller "Main Street" businesses, has encouraged its members to become more involved in school issues as well. Overall, business leaders can help a school district focus its curriculum on the critical thinking, communications, and other broader skills students will need in the workplace, as well as provide opportunities for real-world learning and contribute a variety of resources to the school system.

An effective public engagement process can also help businesses. In considering the quality of schools that are necessary to provide a competitive edge, businesses are finding that they need to look beyond the skills their own employees need. Given current trends toward outsourcing and specializing, more businesses also need to take into account whether local schools can attract and competitively serve the workforce needs of companies they need in close proximity as suppliers or customers. As more of the American economy becomes involved in the technology, knowledge, and other high-skill industries, even local service industries (for example, cleaning services, restaurants, or retailers) increasingly recognize the need for public schools to furnish the high-quality education required to attract and sustain high-skill companies—which, with their employees, are customers for their own business.

To be sure, some business people might narrowly—and inappropriately—view schools as training centers for entry-level jobs, and they might bring that perspective to the public engagement process. When that happens, though, their agenda will immediately become apparent, and other players in the process will surely work to keep that viewpoint in check. Such occasions can then become an opportunity for school districts to focus these businesses on the district's overall mission and to reinforce the important relationship between business' involvement with the schools and the overall well-being of the community. Clearly, too, as with parents and other groups, school systems should use the engagement process to listen for ways in which they can help their business communities.

In terms of supporting student achievement, the local business community can help in many ways, including:

- Advising schools in developing curricula and instruction (such as communications and problem solving) that are needed in the work place
- Participating in adopt-a-school programs
- Coming into the schools and motivating students by showing the relevance of schoolwork to the workplace
- Providing work-study programs of limited hours (no more than 15 hours per week) for students to benefit from work experience
- Donating equipment and supplies to the schools
- Assisting schools and school systems in developing and managing programs (improving school effectiveness in using technology, for example)
- Reinforcing education and parenting with their own employees
- Establishing policies that will enable employees to take leave to meet with teachers during work hours
- Providing support for school budgets and local bond measures and lobbying state legislators on key education issues
- Encouraging business people to run for the local school board.

Connection with the business community can occur through multiple forums. In addition to conducting a broad public conversation about the schools, school districts might also find it beneficial to establish business councils that involve more business participants with a specific focus on their needs and contribution. In some school districts, the business community maintains a foundation that is separate from the school system but works closely with it.

**Citizens at Large.** At first blush, it may not seem important to involve citizens who don't have children in school or who don't fall within a specific group, such as business people or civic leaders. After all, these folks don't appear to have as personal an interest in the school system. Further, the general citizens may be viewed as less informed about specific programs or the school system as a whole.

Yet, citizens at large comprise the great majority of taxpayers and eligible voters in the community. They have personal values about education, express opinions to others in the community, and make a variety of decisions based on their perspective and confidence in specific schools or the system as a whole. The general public's involvement can help round out the discussions and better enable school officials to determine the public's expectations and perceptions of the school system.

**The Media.** The media are also essential participants in the public engagement process. In addition to being information outlets, the media are profit-making businesses, so their financial success is closely tied to a thriving local economy. Hence, while the media have an interest in news that sells (including horror stories about the schools), they also have a genuine stake in the relationship between the schools and the economic vibrancy of the community.

By inviting the media to become part of the public engagement process, school districts should not expect that they will become "good-news" outlets or serve as the school system's public relations department. Indeed, the media will be especially sensitive to being used in this fashion. Rather, the purpose of the media's presence is that they frequently can offer a broad perspective on the community, the schools, and future development—all of which can significantly contribute to a conversation about student achievement.

Obviously, what members of the media hear during the public engagement process is fair game for publication—and that needs to be considered. On balance, media participation should be viewed as a valuable resource for building public understanding about student achievement and the need to value children, education, and the schools. With their broader reach, the media can also communicate effectively with those who are not part of the school system's public engagement process.

Generally, the publisher or senior manager should be invited rather than the education reporter, since members of senior management are more likely to have a broad community perspective along with the connections needed to involve other community leaders. Further, senior managers have the internal clout needed to keep a news outlet's focus on the public dialogue to raise student achievement.

**Preschool and Day-care Providers.** If all students are going to achieve at high levels, then all students must come to school ready to learn. For schools interested in boosting achievement, then, it is important to have preschool and day-care providers at the table. These providers can help a district pinpoint trends among preschool children (who will eventually become kindergarten and first-grade students) and improve school readiness. There is also the possibility that such a connection will lead to better preschool curricula, better preparation for public school programs, and better parent involvement.

Finally, preschool and day-care providers can provide information about child development and the out-of-school lives of young children that might not be apparent to classroom teachers. By being involved, such providers also will be more likely to work with the public schools to support their vision and specific student achievement goals.

**Senior Citizens.** Schools often overlook senior citizens because their lifestyle might not seem relevant to a discussion about academic achievement or life in the contemporary family. However, those generalizations ignore the importance of senior citizens as a group and the contribution that many older individuals can make. Indeed, senior citizens are the fastest-growing age group in the United States, and their numbers include former teachers, business people, and civic leaders. In many cases, senior citizens are the primary-care providers for children whose parents work outside the home. Beyond their contribution to a dialogue about student achievement, senior citizens also have the time to help implement programs and ideas. Additionally, senior citizens who are involved with the schools, or who at least understand the school system's mission and direction, are more likely to support the schools as voters and to encourage others in their age network to do likewise.

**Social Service Agencies.** All too often students come to

school with obstacles to learning. From birth to age 18, children spend only 9 percent of their time in school. For some children, the remaining 91 percent of their time offers enriching opportunities that support their education. For others, that time produces educational deprivation as a result of ill-prepared parents, poor health and nutrition, and a variety of other factors. If those children are to succeed in school, they will need help from other public agencies.

Social service agencies can help because they have the services, funding, and focus to address needs that, while not in the purview of the schools, are essential for academic success. However, the chances for that success are bound to be enhanced if these agencies understand the school district's vision, remain committed to it, and are willing to coordinate strategies and services with the schools. Further, by being at the table, social service agencies can provide important insights and data about students. Social service agencies can also add to the discussion of a broad range of student achievement issues such as preschool readiness, school-to-work transition, and crime prevention programs.

**Public Officials.** Public officials such as mayors and county commissioners can be important resources to include in public engagement activities. For one thing, as prominent local leaders, these officials can bring other community leaders into the process and provide media visibility. For another, they can help forge partnerships between the school system and business, civic, and governmental groups. School districts should be aware of several political considerations to make, though. Involving public officials might mean setting aside a certain amount of "air time" at meetings or their taking undue credit—or providing undue blame—for the successes or failures of the school system or the public engagement process. Additionally, public officials may use the public engagement process to satisfy their own agendas.

Still, while elected officials might want political credit for their involvement, most are likely to see a public engagement effort as a positive contribution to the quality of life and the economic development of the community, and their "buy-in" from being involved generally will be a valuable asset.

**Universities and Community Colleges.** Many school systems have universities and community colleges nearby. These institutions can be significant assets in the public engagement process and in raising student achievement. Specifically, postsecondary institutions can:

- Assist in developing and facilitating the school district's public engagement process
- Articulate the academic standard needed for success at the university/community college level
- Assist in designing K-12 curriculum and programs
- Provide data and information on successful education programs implemented elsewhere
- Assist in designing or conducting research within the school district on issues relating to student achievement
- Provide technical assistance and programming to help meet specific challenges (such as providing counseling programs to reduce student violence)
- Enrich student learning through guest lectures and cooperative programs.

**Students.** Today's students are diverse, with different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds that can affect a school system's goals and its approach to student achievement. Students also differ in their motivation, aspirations, and reaction to a district's goals and solutions. For example, highly motivated college-bound student might view high academic standards differently than lower-performing classmates who see high school as seat time or themselves as nonlearners. Clearly, any communitywide discussion about student achievement would benefit from the reality check that a diverse range of students can provide.

In the 1996 book *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*, psychologist Laurence Steinberg illustrates the importance of including students in such a dialogue. Steinberg studied the attitudes of 20,000 high school students and found that about 40 percent of students "are just going through the motions" and doing only "as much as it takes to avoid getting into trouble." In a word, nearly half of high school students are "disengaged." In searching for causes, Steinberg found a complex set of in-school and out-of-school social behaviors and attitudes that can influence student disengagement and indifference to learning. His recommendation: We need to "refocus the debate" to address attitudes toward school and learning rather than simply changing curriculum and instruction. By encouraging students to take part in public engagement process, a school board can begin to focus the community and the school system on issues of student attitudes.

Finally, school districts should consider asking recent

high school students to share their perspectives on the value of their education, the school environment, and the various needs and pressures they experienced. Graduates could give a school district insight into how well it is preparing students for college or the workplace and what could be done to improve that preparation.

**Representatives of the School System.** Members of the professional staff who are charged with drafting any student achievement plan obviously should be involved in public engagement activities. Additionally, school districts should consider teachers, principals, and other employees as observers or participants in the dialogue. Ultimately, the school system's employees must carry out the school-based component of the plan, and they are more likely to buy in to the process if their interests have been represented. Their experience of the day-to-day realities of the classroom and their knowledge of what students and employees are doing—and can do—will also be valuable.

Depending on the purpose and format of the meeting, the role of school employees will vary. For example, participation at a vision-setting exercise might be minimal, while involvement in defining standards might be more extensive. Further, while these participants should be informative, they should not dominate the discussion or try to bury an issue under professional jargon. Neither should they appear defensive or hostile to proposals. School staff should have a clear idea of what is expected of them at the various stages of the process.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Public Engagement in the Real World

How does a public engagement initiative actually proceed? A number of organizations—including state school boards associations—conduct public engagement programs for school districts and have developed models for the process. Although most of these models have a common intent and many involve similar procedures, each puts the pieces together differently. No one model is best for all school districts, but the following descriptions can suggest effective approaches:

### *IEL and Public Agenda: Planning and Implementation*

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), based in Washington, D.C., together with Public Agenda, based in New York City, has conducted numerous public engagement programs for local school districts. IEL's focus is on convening the community to discuss the public schools generally, which could then lead to subsequent steps, such as vision setting and the development of a student achievement plan.

As the chart shows, the IEL process begins with the selection of sponsoring organizations in the community. The sponsors then appoint a broader representative planning committee to organize a larger community meeting. The main functions of the planning committee are to:

1. Select the topics, agenda items, and goals for a larger community meeting.

2. Undertake specific logistical activities to ensure the endeavor is a success.

3. Determine the list of participants to be invited, the guidance these participants will be given, and how, if at all, to involve the media.

The planning committee would most likely require a couple of months to complete its work (including receiving responses from those invited).

In setting up the meeting, IEL has found that training for moderators and recorders—including written guides and videos—is essential. The community conversation then occurs and includes written products such as participant surveys and reports on the meeting. Following the community conversation, the planning committee and moderators meet to debrief and consider the next step—including sending reports to participants and determining future plans.

Compared to a full-scale town meeting, this approach involves fewer participants (between 75 and 100 per meeting) and would be more structured in terms of working toward specific goals. The four-hour meetings could be organized around general sessions to set the stage, discuss common themes, and bring closure to the event, as well as involve small group discussions (with moderators) to address specific issues.

This approach can operate in conjunction with other activities described in Chapter 3. For example, community polling and focus groups can be used to help the planning committee understand key issues, attitudes, and expectations that could be addressed at the public meeting.

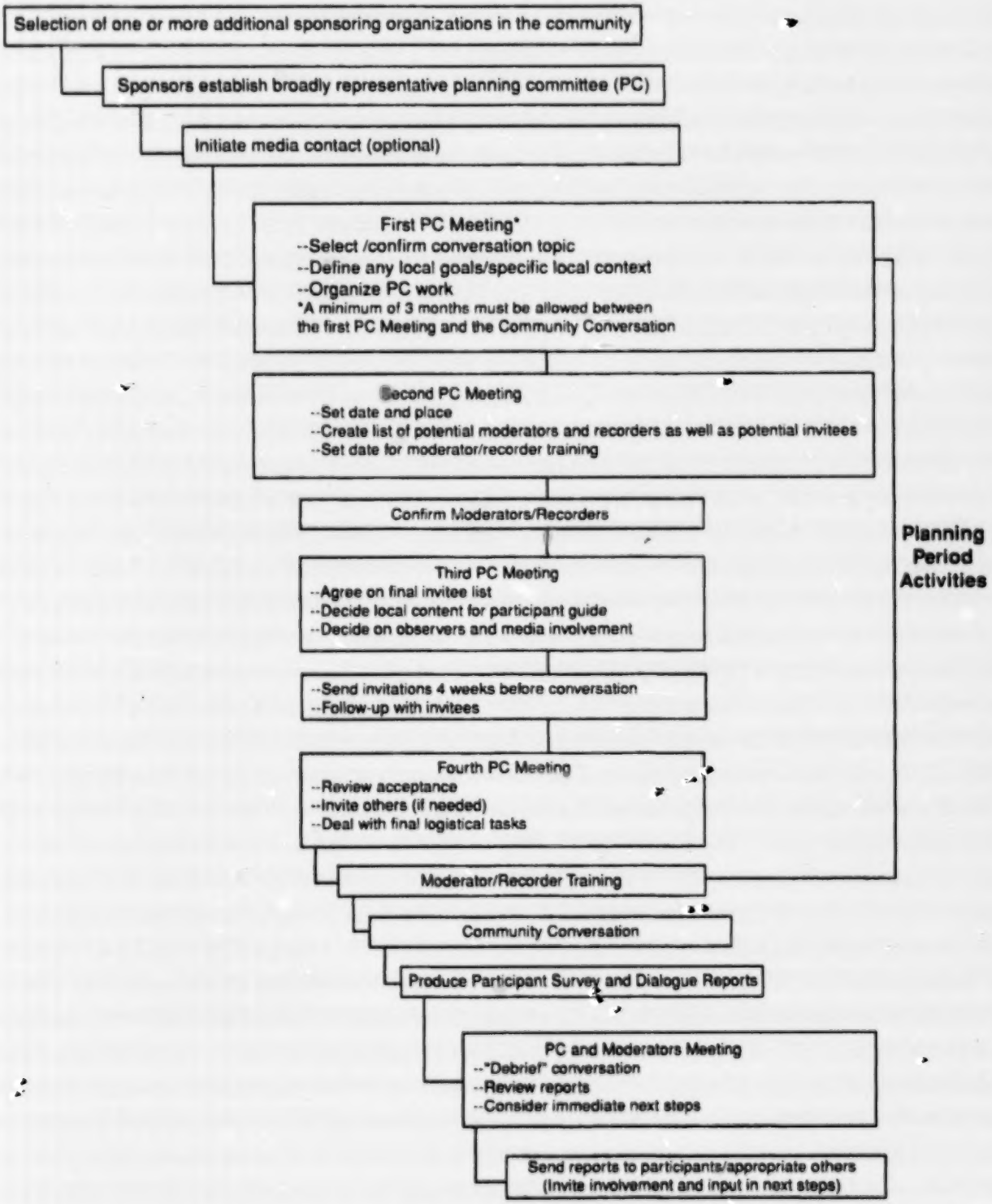
### *Colorado: Public Meetings and Study Groups*

The Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) embraces similar principles but uses a different model.

Under the CASB approach, a planning committee is formed that represents a cross section of the community, and that committee then organizes a communitywide meeting. The purpose of the larger meeting is to address the public's viewpoints on a specific problem. After the problem is framed and possible solutions identified—with their pros and cons—CASB writes an issue booklet for use in small discussion groups or study circles that will take place throughout the community. The purpose

# IEL Public Agenda
## Public Conversations About the Public Schools

Note: The Community Conversation Planning Guide provides details for initiating, planning, and conducting a conversation and ideas for immediate next steps


Selection of one or more additional sponsoring organizations in the community
Sponsors establish broadly representative planning committee (PC)
Initiate media contact (optional)
First PC Meeting*
--Select /confirm conversation topic
--Define any local goals/specific local context
--Organize PC work
*A minimum of 3 months must be allowed between the first PC Meeting and the Community Conversation
Second PC Meeting
--Set date and place
--Create list of potential moderators and recorders as well as potential invitees
--Set date for moderator/recorder training
Confirm Moderators/Recorders
Third PC Meeting
--Agree on final invitee list
--Decide local content for participant guide
--Decide on observers and media involvement
--Send invitations 4 weeks before conversation
--Follow-up with invitees
Fourth PC Meeting
--Review acceptance
--Invite others (if needed)
--Deal with final logistical tasks
Moderator/Recorder Training
Community Conversation
Produce Participant Survey and Dialogue Reports
PC and Moderators Meeting
--"Debrief" conversation
--Review reports
--Consider immediate next steps
Send reports to participants/appropriate others (Invite involvement and input in next steps)
Planning Period Activities

of study circles is to work through conflicting views and values about the choices. It should be noted that only the public can identify the public's interest on an issue. Therefore, the issue must be framed by the public itself or through public discussion. This framework is not meant to constrain the choices of the elected school board but to provide a basis for giving public direction to guide its action. CASB provides training for moderators to ensure neutrality.

As community members talk about how an issue affects them and why the issue is important, school board members listen, but they do not interact to defend or rationalize their previous actions or policies. By attending these study circle sessions, board members show the public that someone is listening and cares.

Board members also deliver a 15-minute report on what they have heard at regularly scheduled public board meetings that take place after each study circle.

After a series of study circles, the board (often joined by other public policymakers) calls for a communitywide forum to hear what common ground or sense of direction the public has reached on the issue.

Finally, at a regular board meeting, the board itself deliberates on the issue and delineates a range of actions it believes the public would support. This approach provides the basis for giving public direction to locally elected school boards.

In this process, as would be the case with any of the other models, CASB works with school board members to evaluate how the undertaking benefited their own decision-making and the interests of the larger community. The association also facilitates each step of the process, including training for moderators.

Compared to the IEL approach, CASB's approach is centered more on problem-solving than general opinion gathering. Hence, it is more likely to be used as a method for addressing specific issues that could arise further along in a school board's student achievement planning process.

## *South Carolina: Strategic Planning with the Community*

Using a process developed by the Cambridge Group of Montgomery, Ala., the South Carolina School Boards Association (SCSBA) provides school districts with a model for strategic planning for student achievement that engages a cross section of their communities. The process results in a five-year strategic plan that changes the way the district and individual schools do business.

The process begins with a commitment on the part of the school board to follow the strategic planning direction outlined by staff in a public meeting. Next, members of the SCSBA staff work with the district's superintendent and an administrator designated as the internal facilitator to identify people to serve on the 25 to 30-member planning team. The directive given at this stage is clear and absolute: People in the community should be able to look at the team and find someone on it who looks or thinks as they do and lives nearby. Such diversity is crucial if the plan is to have credibility once it's drafted. While critics are encouraged to join the effort, the defining characteristic of someone serving on the planning team is to be able to put special interests aside and operate with good will.

The team also includes the superintendent, two board members, and school staff. The majority of the team members, though, are community residents, both those who have children in the public schools and those who don't. Everyone from students to senior citizens takes part, and participation in the team is by invitation of the superintendent.

Once assembled, the planning team meets for two and a half days of intensive work, in small and large groups, to develop draft components of the district's strategic plan, including the mission statement, objectives, parameters, and strategies. The team also spends time defining the community's core beliefs, which form the foundation of the plan. Wording for these five components comes by consensus, not by vote—a powerful concept that surprises most participants, who are accustomed to the idea of majority rule. The idea of talking, compromising, and working until everyone in the group can agree gives the process its power.

After the plan is drafted, the school district issues a communitywide invitation asking anyone who wishes to become involved to serve on an action team that will develop a step-by-step approach to achieving one of the strategic-planning strategies. Everyone who volunteers is placed on team, though the facilitator sometimes assigns volunteers to one team and not another to ensure diversity. These teams then work for three to five months, often meeting once a week, to develop their plan of action. Again, the final document must reflect a consensus.

Once that consensus is reached, each team presents its recommendations to the planning team, which can accept the plans as presented, request minor modifica-

tions, or send plans back for further work.

After all the plans are set, the strategic plan is presented to the school board for acceptance. By this point, the district probably has between five and eight strategies to consider, and as many as 200 staff and community members are probably involved. Because of the time and emotion invested, these team members feel a tremendous sense of ownership.

Following the board's adoption of the plan, the superintendent uses it to guide decisions involving money and allocation of staff time. For its part, the board also insures that the strategic planning priorities are funded annually and that the superintendent keeps it and the community apprized of progress. School districts that have used the approach have discovered another advantage as well: Often the community will set goals that are higher and more dramatic than those the superintendent or board could set, enabling the board to take bold steps knowing that it has community support.

Once the district's plan is in place, this public engagement process continues at each school with the principal convening a planning team of 15 to 20 people. The school level plan complements the district's plan, using the same beliefs and parameters. In addition, a school-level team develops a mission statement for that school, objectives, and two to four tactics. An action team of parents, staff, and community members then tackles each tactic in the same way the district action teams did. In a district with eight schools, the number of individuals involved in designing educational plans for meaningful changes could then top 800.

This approach to strategic planning offers a powerful way to involve many publics, build support for doing things differently, and make student achievement the No. 1 priority of the board, the administration, and the community.

## *Washington: Involving the Public in Strategic Planning*

Public engagement initiatives are infused throughout the work the Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) does with local school boards in Washington state. A good starting point for this effort is the strategic planning process. Once school districts have committed to using the WSSDA strategic planning model—and before their first meeting to begin the process—school districts must appoint a core visioning team of approximately 10 members. This team, which includes a variety of members of the public and students along with staff and school board members, receives direct training in the planning process and teamwork so that it can provide leadership throughout the plan development. The core team also is responsible for developing a larger visioning team with the same broad community representation. This larger team then develops the district's strategic plan: vision, beliefs, mission, environmental scanning, goals, target objectives, and strategies and strategic action plans.

Though the school board is not the body that does the strategic planning in this model, it does retain the responsibility to respond to the plan the community visioning team develops.

School districts also must commit to ensuring that a strategic plan remains paramount in the governance of the district and that the community remains involved in the implementation and evaluation of the strategic plan. Further, school districts are advised to integrate both their strategic plan and the ongoing planning process into district policy based on sample policies WSSDA provides.

Once the network is established, board members are responsible for contacting each key communicator monthly with an update of district activities and for listening to the community leaders—a true system of two way-communication.

WSSDA also encourages districts to create strategic plan evaluation policies and recommend that the visioning team meet once a year to assess the district's progress in implementing its strategic plan. Additionally, the team reports the plan's progress to board and recommends changes in direction or priority of initiatives or realignment of resources to fulfill the plan.

In addition, school board members are encouraged to set up key communications networks as part of their advocacy role. This can be done on a large scale by the district or each board member can have a small network that he or she works with. Specifically, board members are encouraged to identify 8 to 10 people in the community that are well-known, particularly outside education. The board should coordinate so that each member does not contact the same few community leaders. Board members contact these community leaders and ask them to identify other leaders in the community. The original list and new lists are all compared, and the names that show up repeatedly form the key communicator base. This extra step ensures that board members are not relying solely on their own circle of friends and acquaintances as the key communicators in the community.

Using the planning model and sample policies, districts then design strategic action plans to implement district goals and target objectives that have been designed by action-planning task force, which, like the other teams, consists of relevant representatives of the staff and community.

## *Wisconsin: Using Focus Groups to Address Achievement*

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) uses focus groups to help school districts understand what their customers need and want. The WASB process starts with clear objectives for the focus group information being sought, e.g., determine what the community thinks students should be able to achieve by high school graduation. WASB also sets objectives as to how focus groups can help the school system use the information, (e.g., to inform the curriculum committee).

To meet these objectives, several open-ended questions are created and then pretested with a small cross section of the community to ensure they generate relevant ideas and discussion.

Again keeping the objectives in mind (in this case, determining what high school students should achieve), WASB identifies a participant profile for each focus group. Although the focus groups may vary from each other, the eight to 10 people selected for each focus group should share similar attitudes and demographics. For example, they might all be employers, service section employees, manufacturing employees, or parents. This approach ensures concentrated and thorough responses from each targeted sector of the community represented by the sum total of the focus groups.

Like other models, the WASB's use of focus groups involves the services of trained facilitators and recorders. Following the focus group sessions, the facilitators meet to discuss the recommendations and conclusions from each group, including identifying common and unique themes.

A final report is prepared and discussed with the school board and presented to the professional staff working on the specific areas of achievement that were under discussion. The staff is then given a specific timeline to report back to the board to describe how the information will be used to change or maintain current practices. School administrators then meet to share the information derived from the process and plan for next stages to implement, evaluate, or obtain more information regarding the recommended changes.

## *Arkansas: Tips for Using Study Circles*

The Arkansas School Boards Association (ASBA) assists its member school districts in developing public engagement programs. The Study Circles Resource Center has provided a basic recipe for putting together a model for communitywide study circles. It has been used in small rural school districts, such as Alread, as well as in the metropolitan district of North Little Rock. Among the tips the center offers are the following:

1. *Find a few allies.* Identify a few people the district knows well, has worked with before, and who would be excited about this project. Tell them why study circles on education would be a good idea for the community, and introduce them to the study circle process by holding a single pilot study circle with this group. A good question to use, is, "How can grassroots dialogue on education benefit our schools and our community?" If the group is larger and people do not know one another, consider holding a "get "acquainted" discussion instead.

2. *Begin building a coalition.* A sponsoring coalition is the engine that drives study circles. Include a wide variety of people and organizations as well as the usual education groups and representatives: teacher organizations, school administrators, PTA's, and the local board of education. Others to include are managers of companies that are major employers in the area, business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, civic organizations such as Rotary and League of Women Voters, clergy and ministerial alliances, and neighborhood associations. Try to make this group look like the community in terms of demographics, and think seriously about who needs to be at the table and how to reach them. Such a step is crucial for a truly inclusive grassroots discussion. Another good idea is to run a pilot study circle for as many of these people as soon as possible. A pilot can be an effective part of the organizing meeting. It's fun, and it builds understanding and support.

3. *Find a coordinator.* A good coordinator is the linchpin of a successful program. The ideal coordinator is someone who is an experienced organizer, is detail-oriented, works well with different types of people, and is connected to different sectors of the community. The coordinator may be a salaried employee of one of the organizations in the coalition, or the coalition could raise funds to hire a coordinator; frequently communities are able to enlist a volunteer or a service organization to take on the task. (Loaned executives, graduate students, and recently retired people are good candidates for this role.) A medium-sized or large city will probably require a full-time coordinator, while a smaller town may be able to get by

with a part-time coordinator. The coordinator's job is to enlist volunteers and coordinate them in completing the tasks described in item 4 below.

4. *Form committees to:*

- Work with the media. Study circles are not town hall or school board meetings. Their ongoing and deliberative nature requires a different approach in media coverage.

- Plan for the action forum that will be held after the study circle discussions are completed. This is the time for all the individual study circles to share their concerns and suggestions and to begin planning how to address them. This is when the thinking begins to be translated into action.

- Develop a budget and plan for fundraising and soliciting in-kind donations or support. (Study circles tend to be more labor-intensive than capital-intensive, making for high-quality, low-cost public engagement.)

- Document the work and plan for evaluation. The school district can better assess its program and learn what effects it is having and how to improve its effort by planning for some type of evaluation ahead of time.

- Identify, recruit, and train facilitators. A well-trained facilitator is essential for a well-run study circle, and good facilitators are a high-priority item. People who listen well and who can keep their opinions to themselves while soliciting the thoughts of others make good facilitators.

- Recruit participants. Every organization in the coalition should take responsibility for recruiting participants for the study circles. Make a strong effort to recruit from all members of the community and take special pains to include people who might be otherwise left out. Emphasize personal invitations but also use brochures, flyers, and posters creatively to reach people from across the community.

- Plan a kickoff to be held one or two weeks before the study circles begin. This should be an event that will draw media attention and get people to come out and sign up to participate in study circles.

- Find sites and handle other logistical details. Public buildings such as schools, libraries, church halls, community centers, businesses, firehouses, and union halls are excellent sites for study circles. Establishing different places, times, and dates to accommodate study circle groups also will make the discussions accessible to more people. Consider, too, whether to include child care, transportation, or refreshments. Will there be participants with special needs?

5. *Hold the kickoff event.*

6. *Monitor the program and support the study circles.* The coordinator will be trouble-shooting while the discussions are underway. The facilitation committee should convene facilitators to compare notes. The sites and logistics committee should start a new study circle group for people who register late or miss the first one or two study circles. The action committee should collect the records from each study circle. The media committee should help journalists report on the study circles to the larger community.

7. *After the study circles conclude, hold an action forum.* Using the results of the study circles, and possibly involving study circle members, convene a larger meeting for a broad based and informed community discussion leading to possible school board action. Make sure it is well publicized and open to the public.

8. *Support and track action efforts.*

9. *Pause, reflect, and review what you have learned.*

10. *Continue the study circle process again, either on the same issue with new participants or on a new issue.* This will help sustain the study circle program and build civic life within the community.

# CONCLUSION

Through engaging the public, school boards have at their command a powerful force to help raise the academic achievement of all students.

Drawing from the diverse intelligence and volunteerism of their communities, school boards can bring to bear a wealth of resources that are not ordinarily available within school systems to strengthen the educational program and provide the various kinds of support many children need. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how a school system could obtain optimal success if it operates in isolation from the ever-more diverse realities of contemporary family and community life. The fast-paced dynamics of the marketplace and the explosion of information that is taking place point to the necessity for drawing a stronger linkage between the schools and the public at large.

Public engagement, as described in this publication, offers school systems a mechanism for broadening the relevance of education, building greater individual and organizational commitment to children, strengthening taxpayer support for the school district's program, and providing greater responsiveness to the system's varied customers, among the long list of other benefits that have been described.

Beyond the potential for raising student achievement, public engagement activities can position education and children as top priorities in broader efforts to build the economic and civic vibrancy of the community. Additionally, public engagement can empower local schools boards, as governing institutions, to address the many academic and social challenges their school systems face by providing leadership on a truly public scale.

However, public engagement is not education's new "silver bullet," and it is hard work. To successfully engage the public, a school board will need a well-thought-out strategy, including a clear notion of the leadership, commitment, and teamwork that the board itself must be willing to bring to the process. Fortunately, a substantial amount of work has been done in both the private and government sectors in this arena. Based on that work, this publication has presented ways in which school leaders can view their constituencies. It has shown how local people can be invited to serve and be served by the school system through techniques that offer the public opportunities to participate in, and value, the school system and the quality of education it provides. It also has presented proven techniques for organizing the public to participate in building a common vision, implementation plans, accountability systems, and other key objectives of the school system. Numerous resources and services are available that can provide even more detail in each of these areas, including case examples, such as those presented in the companion volume to this publication.

Public education today is tied to big concepts that are embodied by words like *mission, achievement, accountability, quality, diversity, relevance, choice,* and *service.* What better way to build commitment to these concepts among parents, business leaders, school employees and—most importantly—the students themselves than by bringing the public together with the school system in a unified effort to reach success?

# RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A good place to begin a search for resources on community engagement is your state school boards association. Some state associations offer programs to local school districts or can identify the most effective service providers in the field. Additionally, the National School Boards Association web site at *http://www.nsba.org* identifies ideas and local practices—including material contained within its Student Achievement and Key Work listings.

## *Organizational Resources*

American Association of School Administrators
1801 N. Moore St.
Arlington, VA 22209
(703) 528-0700
*http://www.aasa.org*

American Youth Policy Forum
1836 Jefferson Place, NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 775-9731
*http://www.aypf.org*

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Brown University
Box 1985
Providence, RI 02912
(401) 863-7990
*http://www.aisr.brown.edu*

America's Promise
909 North Washington St.
Suite 400
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 684-4500
*http://www.americaspromise.org*

Business Coalition for Education Reform
1201 New York Ave., NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 787-2848
*http://www.bcer.com*

Communities in Schools
277 South Washington St.
Suite 210
Alexandria, VA 22314
(800) CIS-4KIDS
*http://www.cisnet.org*

Institute for Educational Leadership
1001 Connecticut Ave., NW
Suite 310
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 822-8405
*http://www.iel.org/programs/engage*

Institute for Responsive Education
50 Nightingale Hall
Northeastern University
Boston, MA 02115
(617) 373-2595
*http://www.resp-ed.org*

National Alliance of Business
1201 New York Ave., NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 787-2848
*http://www.nab.com*

National Association of Partners in Education
901 N. Pitt St., Suite 320
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 836-4880
*http://www.napehq.org*

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
3929 Old Lee Hwy
Suite 91-A
Fairfax, VA 22030
(703) 359-8973
*http://www.ncpie.org*

National PTA
330 North Wabash Ave.
Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 670-6782
*http://www.pta.org/programs/append.htm*

Public Education Network
601 13th St., NW
Suite 900 North
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 628-7460
*http://www.publiceducation.org*

Public Agenda
6 East 39th St.
New York, NY 10016
(212) 686-6610
*http://www.publicagenda.org*

Study Circles Resource Center
Box 203, Rt. 169
Promfret, CT 06258
(860) 928-2616
*http://www.studycircles.org*

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20208
(202) 219-1556
*http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI*

U.S. Department of Education
Regional Educational Laboratories
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-0498
(800) USA-LEARN
*http://www.ed.gov/prog_info/Labs*

Voice Poll Communications
3331 Broadway
Everett, WA 98201
(425) 259-4205
*http://www.voicepoll.com*

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Anne L. Bryant
Executive Director
National School Boards Association

Harold P. Seamon
Deputy Executive Director

**Office of Advocacy**

Michael A. Resnick
Associate Executive Director

Darrel W. Drury
Director, Policy Research

Reginald Felton
Director, Federal Relations

Daniel Fuller
Director, Federal Programs

Lori Meyer
Director, Federal Legislation

Kathleen Branch
Federal Networks Advocate

## *about NSBA...*

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. NSBA achieves its mission by amplifying the influence of school boards across the country in all public forums relevant to federal and national education issues, by representing the school board perspective before federal government agencies and with national organizations that affect education, and by providing vital information and services to Federation Members and school boards throughout the nation.

NSBA advocates local school boards as the ultimate expression of the unique American institution of representative governance of public school districts. NSBA supports the capacity of each school board—acting on behalf of and in close concert with the people of its community—to envision the future of education in its community, to establish a structure and environment that allow all students to reach their maximum potential, to provide accountability for the people of its community on performance in the schools, and to serve as the key community advocate for children and youth and their public schools.

Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Guam, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. NSBA represents the nation's 95,000 school board members. These board members govern 14,772 local school districts that serve more than 46.5 million public school students—approximately 90 percent of all elementary and secondary school students in the nation. Virtually all school board members are elected; the remainder are appointed by elected officials.

NSBA policy is determined by a 150-member Delegate Assembly of local school board members from throughout the nation. The 24-member Board of Directors translates this policy into action. Programs and services are administered by the NSBA executive director, assisted by a professional staff. NSBA is located in metropolitan Washington, D.C.

National School Boards Association
1680 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3493
Phone: 703-838-6722
Fax: 703-683-7590
*Web Address: http://www.nsba.org E-Mail: info@nsba.org*
*Excellence and Equity in Public Education through School Board Leadership*

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Alexandria, VA 22314
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